

SUBJECT, SITE AND SIGHT : FREUD AND TSCHUMI ON THE ACROPOLIS

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In June 2013, the authors, en route to Barcelona, were delayed in Athens. They found themselves for the first time standing on the Acropolis and completing within a timeframe of twenty-four hours the spatial narrative that is staged between the Parthenon, the remains of the Dionysian Theatre on the Southern slopes of the Acropolis and, across the site of the theatre, the 2009 Acropolis Museum by French-Swiss Architect Bernard Tschumi and his Athens-based partner/project architect Michael Photiadis.

"For example, Lukianowicz (1958) describes a case of autoscopy in which an architect observed a complete duplicate of himself enter the room, merge with himself, and then depart again."¹

Self and Site

In a letter to Romain Rolland, on the occasion of the French writers 70th birthday, Sigmund Freud reflected with acute clarity and analytical rigour on what he recognised to have been sensations of *derealisation*, of *depersonalisation* and *estrangement* from self that he had experienced 30 years earlier, in 1904, when he was travelling with this brother. Diverted by circumstance more than by a conscious decision to Athens rather than Corfu via Trieste, the brothers found themselves unhappy by the change in destination, Sigmund markedly more so than his younger brother. Standing on the Acropolis and gazing over the landscape, an uncanny thought had entered Freud's mind: "Also existiert das alles wirklich so, wie wir es auf der Schule gelernt haben?" / "So does this all really exist like we have learned it at school?" The experience seemed one of unreality, and Freud categorized it as "A Disturbance of Memory"² during which he observed himself as separating into *himself* and *another* whose perception of the situation was an entirely different one.

This other self, rather than expressing surprise at the reality of the Acropolis in the moment of its direct experience, was astonished at how one could ever doubt the site's existence.

The whole psychical situation which seems so confused and is so difficult to describe, can be satisfactorily cleared up assuming that at the time I had (or might have had) a momentary feeling: What I see here is not real. Such a feeling is known as a feeling of derealisation.³

Freud recalled the Athenian episode vividly, and explicitly incorporated it into his scientific work of the uncovering of psychic powers and the mechanisms that lead to the formation of pathological conditions, but he was not concerned with the site as a physical location where the *here but not here* was so startlingly experienced, but rather with the roots of the phenomenon of the reduplication of self. He identifies the distancing of self as enabling psychic defence (keeping something at bay from the conscious), and as belonging to the mechanisms of repression.

Fig. 1.
View from
Parthenon to
Acropolis Museum



Beyond the value of Freud's self-analysis in a psychoanalytical framework, the "Disturbance of Memory" throws into question an assumed unity of self and body: while Freud is looking at the Acropolis, he is simultaneously observing himself looking at himself. And while Freud's very own psychic spectacle of estrangement unfolded, Freud the analyst was intrigued as to the cause of the phenomenon he was observing. The 84 year-old writes in the incidental letter to Rolland, that he traced the origins of the Athenian "Disturbance of Memory" back to a classical oedipal situation between son and father, and Freud describes at length both the conflict with the father and his subsequent feelings of guilt. The location of the event, the Acropolis itself, the reader discovers, while of historical cultural significance, apparently acts as a symbolic catalyst for the event only. In Freud's analysis or: in his looking back, it is the Acropolis that stands for the son's foreign travel without the father or, rather: the son's travel instead of that of the father.

The iconic location becomes significant when its immediate surrounding is considered, as it is inconceivable that Freud would not have caught sight of it: situated below the Parthenon and to the South lie the remains and excavations of one of the main antique Greek amphitheatres, the Theatre of Dionysos, a site dedicated to the act of looking, and, even more so, a site of the double act of looking. Actor and spectator are inextricably linked in this most basic theatrical convention that comprises looking and being looked at. This convention or, agreement stipulates the merging of individual viewers into an impermanent community – the audience – defined by the communal act of looking at the same time and in the same space for the duration of the performance.

A temporary construction, fragile and unstable, it surfaces in Freud's Acropolis episode as a theatre of memory and it opens up a triangle between site, actor-subject and spectator-subject that is entirely linked by this act of looking, realized in performance through a constant feedback loop between auditorium and stage, between actor and spectator.

Elginism

The concept of the feedback loop or: reverse or back projection, is not only central to theatrical communication, but also helps to explain the workings of memory. Repeated processes of cortical reverse or back projection (between the hippocampus and the parahippocampal regions) are thought to strengthen object recognition and object localisation and to support object contextualisation and item association.⁴

In Freud's Athenian theatre of memory, reverse projections or feedback loops between subject, site and sight both split and strengthen self and identity. To Freud, the disturbing phenomenon of the

reduplication of self is fascinating not as a pathological out-of-body-experience or schizophrenic episode but for its critical and discursive potential: on the stage, as the psychic mechanism of reverse projection kicks into repeated action, the *scopos*, the watchman, relinquishes his authority over the self (*autos*) and observes the performance of the (dual) selves instead.

This phenomenon, termed autoscopy, is both described as a Doppelgänger experience⁵ and as the 'complex psychosensorial hallucinatory perception of one's own body image projected into the external visual space'⁶ in neurological and neuropsychological research. When applying the concept of the autoscopic or Doppelgänger experience across toward experience of site, the Athenian site emerges uncannily, as a Doppelgänger space, a space looking at itself today in a spatial and contextual relationship to the Acropolis Museum, and then, in 1904, in relationship to the forced absence of the majority of the original sculptural Parthenon frieze.

Between 1801 and 1805, the 7th Earl of Elgin had shipped many of the original Parthenon sculptures and a large part of the Parthenon frieze to Scotland to decorate his castle. The artefacts that became known as the *Elgin Marbles* were later sold to the British Museum where they remain today under continued protest from the Greek government, and in a lasting reference to Elgin's pillage, the term *elginism* was coined to denote acts of cultural vandalism.

Of the original 115 blocks spanning a length of 160 meters, 50 meters are now exhibited in the Acropolis Museum, while 75 meters remain in the British Museum. Other fragments are on display in the Louvre, Palermo, the Vatican, Würzburg, Vienna, Munich and Copenhagen. The sculptural narrative that might be of the Panathenaic Procession or a representation of the founding myth of the city of Athens is a hybrid of original blocks and reproductions, cast from fragments and blocks still owned by museums around the world.

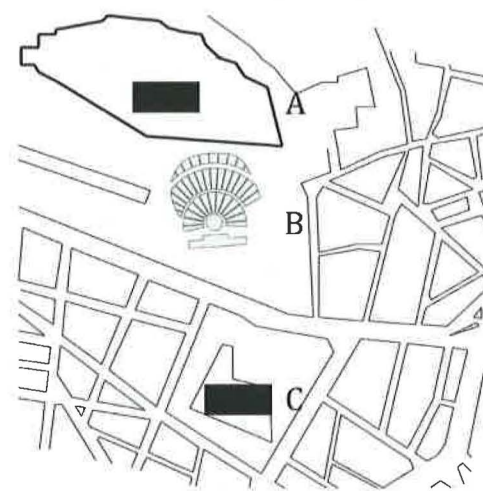


Fig. 2.
Location Plan
indicating positions
of Parthenon (A),
Theatre of Dionysos
(B), Acropolis
Museum (C)

Forming a viewing axis or, axis of history, Tschumi's Acropolis Museum from 2009 stands as an elevated structure across from the ruins of the Dionysian theatre and opposite the Parthenon. It is significant that the Dionysian theatre should be situated between the antique complex (to its Northern side) and the new museum (to the South), and intersecting a direct path between the two with its *cavea* (auditorium) facing the new museum as if it was conceived as an extension of the *proscenium* (stage). It is the theatre, this heterotopia, that is able to layer, to transform and to display memory (history) as described by Freud: in the crystalline moment of being in the absolute present and at the same time observing the absolute present, history opens up revealing hidden conflicts, constellations, layers of emotion and time.

In the new Acropolis museum, that spans 8000m² of exhibition space spread over three floors, Tschumi works with a layering system of base, middle and top. The first floor is characterised by its relationship to the archaeological excavation site of Makriyianna that is clearly visible through the architect's use of glass flooring and use of 92 slender pilotis that allow the structure to float above the excavations.

The second and largest floor with a 10m ceiling height comprises the Main Galleries and houses a diverse collection of artefacts related to the Acropolis, and it is this layer that relates spatially to the geometry of the surrounding streets.

The third floor, known as the Parthenon Hall is the most relevant to our argument of teasing the double act of looking from the architectural design. This layer is swivelled 23 degrees off the base bringing it into parallel alignment with the Parthenon proper and dominating the view through what is essentially a glass box placed upon the Main Gallery.

At this level, the Parthenon is laid out at a scale of 1:1 and becomes a spatial duplicate of the original Parthenon temple but is brought down from its original 10-meter height to eye height. Conceived as a *coup de théâtre*, visitors enter at the exact same location where two holes were blown open in the frieze by the Venetians while they attempted to secure the Acropolis from the Ottoman Turks (who were using it as a gunpowder magazine) in 1687. Thus, according to Photiadis 'we pass through the parts that have been destroyed forever.'⁷

Additionally, stainless steel tubes, representing the Doric columns of the Parthenon, carry fragments of the remaining frieze as well as darkened plaster copies that indicate the form and positioning of those pieces that stubbornly remain in museums scattered across Europe.

Tschumi has described the project as an "Anti-Bilbao"⁸ in reference to American architect Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao where the building has defined the site (in what has become known as the *Bilbao effect*, the effect outstanding architecture can have on the city's socio-urban future). In Athens, Tschumi's intention is the opposite: the building does not compete with its context but rather *reflects* the significance of the site through a process of designing "from the inside out"⁹ creating what here is referred to as a Doppelgänger or autoscopic space.

Tschumi elaborates this approach in a 2008 interview stating that:

I always use the materials rather than the forms in order to give expression to building. I always say "Architecture is the materialisation of a concept". It is always very much about logic, as well as the simplicity and the clarity of the expression. So if La Villette and this building have something in common, it is the clarity of the concept.¹⁰

The Conspiracy of the Double Act of Looking

The late Husserl says, "I do not have the possibility of distancing myself from my body, nor it from me"¹¹, describing a spatial unity of body and self that, even if desired, cannot be disrupted. In what is an essentially topological thinking, experience is localized and space remains abstract, if it is not defined through the body's perception. Freud, on the contrary, celebrates not a desired or assumed unity of body and self (experience) but recognises the unease of the estrangement evoked as being of value. When Freud says, "What I see here is not real", he embraces the elastic properties of the self, evoked by the iconic Athenian site, as an analytical tool: the double act of looking means to also be in the temporary possession of a double consciousness that allows for deep levels of reflection.

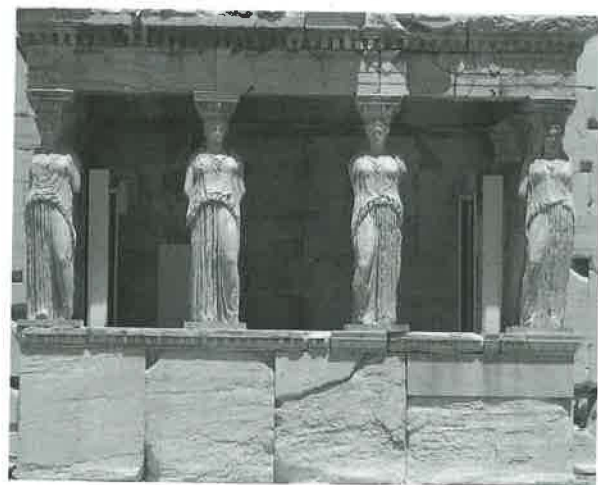


Fig. 3.
Old Temple of
Athena (Detail)

Spectators in the theatre of Dionysos, or any other theatre, anywhere and at any time, are willing participants in the conspiracy of this double act of looking that produces the exact double consciousness, the feeling of derealisation, that Freud describes so persuasively. In contrast to the concept of a spatial unity between body and self, the autoscopic experience lifts the curtain on the discursive and critical theatre of memory to a performance that unfolds from the rupture, the splitting and the reduplication rather than from the affirmation of self.

In architectural discourse, the consideration of autoscopia in conjunction with processes of reverse projection, argued here to be performative practices that engage with site in a critical discursive manner, poses a counterpart to phenomenological positions that speak of the identity of body and self.

Before this background, Tschumi's and Photiadis's *Acropolis Museum* cannot be considered as an entity, as a building by itself, and as such it demands no identity. It is only through the autoscopic event of the Acropolis looking at itself across the remnants of the antique amphitheatre that the contested site reveals itself as the other self: the site that houses both absence and presence of the artefacts that justify the building's very existence. The *Acropolis Museum* that is looked at and that in turn looks at the Acropolis is a Doppelgänger space, a space that speaks, in negation, of the potentiality of a whole.

Tschumi has called the site "polemical", alluding to the controversy surrounding the exact location of the museum building in an old residential precinct. *Polemical* in the original meaning of the term, as *truth-finding*, however, is also, and possibly much more so, the proposition of the curation and exhibition of what has been removed, sold and resold and is now displayed as cultural bounty, as spolia, in other nation's historical museums.

Catching sight of themselves and each other across the theatre of Dionysos, the Parthenon and Acropolis Museum are joined in a performative loop between presence and absence, present and past, and embedded, as Walter Benjamin maintains, in history, that is 'the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now (*Jetztzeit*).'¹²

¹ Blackmore, S. (1986). *Out-of-Body Experiences in Schizophrenia. A Questionnaire Survey*. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 174, pp. 615-619.

² Freud, S. (1936). *Eine Erinnerungsstörung auf der Akropolis*. First published in *Almanach der Psychoanalyse* 1937, Wien 1936, pp. 9-21. — *Gesammelte Werke*, Volume 16, Suhrkamp Verlag: Frankfurt a.M. pp. 250-7.

³ Freud, S. (1936), p. 252.

⁴ Dickerson, B. C. and Eichenbaum, H. (2010). *The Episodic Memory System: Neurocircuitry and Disorders*. *Neuropsychopharmacology* 35, pp. 86-104.

⁵ Brugger et al (2006). *Polyoptic Heautoscopy: Case Report and Review of the Literature*. *Cortex* 42: 666-674, p. 666.

⁶ Lukianowicz, N. (1958). *Autoscopic phenomena*. *Arch Neurol Psychiatry* 80:199-220, p. 201.

⁷ Hawaleshka, D. (2008). *A Vision for the New Acropolis Museum*. Retrieved from: www.speroforum.com

⁸ Aesopos, Y. (2009). *The new Acropolis Museum. Remaking the Collective*. In B. Tschumi B. Architects (Eds.), *The New Acropolis Museum* New York: Rizzoli/Skira pp. 56-65.

⁹ Hawaleshka, D. (2008). *A Vision for the New Acropolis Museum*. Retrieved from www.speroforum.com.

¹⁰ Stathaki, E. (2008). *Interview with Bernard Tschumi*. Retrieved from: www.wallpaper.com

¹¹ Husserl, E. (1952/1989). *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischer Philosophie*. Band 2. The Hague: Martin Nijhoff. p. 159.

¹² Benjamin, W. (1968). *XIV Thesis on History*. In *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books. p. 261.

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To Whom it May Conceren,

This is to confirm that for Expanded Architecture 2013 : Reverse Projections Symposium all papers were double blind peer reviewed on the abstract and the full paper before being presented at the symposium and included in the catalogue publication of the symposium proceedings.

Sincerely,

Sarah Breen Lovett
PhD Candidate
Founder and Co-curator of Expanded Architecture